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# Report on the Twenty Fifth Conference of the International Society for the Sociology of Religions

Leuven, Belgium, July 26-30, 1999

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**REPORT ON THE TWENTY FIFTH CONFERENCE OF THE  
INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR THE SOCIOLOGY OF  
RELIGIONS**

Leuven, Belgium

July 26-30, 1999

The 25<sup>th</sup> conference of the International Society for the Sociology of Religions was held on the campus of the Catholic University (Katholieke Universiteit) for the fiftieth anniversary of the society. The theme for the conference was journeys – journeys in time, space, religious voyages and voyages of initiation, pilgrimages and messianic travels, mystical journeys and itineraries of faith, metaphors all related to the religious sphere. These topics were dealt with in plenary sessions that were held in the morning in the amphitheater of Marie-Therese College in the center of the Old Town. In addition, workshops dealt with these issues, and focused primarily on studies of pilgrimages (in particular at the dawn of the third millenium), Pentecostal movements (in particular in Africa and South America) and syncretic religions (emphasizing migratory situations), afterworld experiences, and the relationships between religion, secularism and the State. This conference however also focused on interdisciplinary travels, by extending its boundaries to anthropology, history and psychology. Aside from theologians, the conference brought together researchers from different fields who are directly or indirectly involved with religious phenomena. Finally, geographic voyages were reflected in the truly international nature of the conference, since more than 40 countries were represented; France coming in first place. A large contingent of researchers and students from the Centre d'Etudes Interdisciplinaires des Faits Religieux took part (including D. Hervieu-Leger, R. Azria, F. Champion, M. Cohen).

The opening session began on July 26, after the opening address, with the inaugural paper presented by Franco Ferrarotti (Universita degli Studi di Roma) on "Voyage as Metaphor". He compared the pilgrims of the Middle Ages to travelers today, both of whom seek gratification in travel, the former to attain eternal happiness and the latter to quench their thirst for the exotic. What differentiates these two modes of travel is the return; namely, modern tourists travel for travel's sake and do not find inner peace. Rather, travel has become the malaise of the century. The second

speaker, Tahar Labib from the University of Tunis, dealt with "Islam and the Journey's End : how the Other has become West". This paper, which stressed the importance in Islam of journeys and moving from place to place, showed how the image of the West has been transformed. At its height, (9<sup>th</sup> century) the Moslem world was a combination of cultures, pilgrimages, cultural itineraries, and expanding Islam. The remote Other (the West) was perceived as being similar. Later, the Moslem world experienced a period of political disintegration, cultural regression and a turning inward. The West became absolute Otherness, reversing the direction of the journey towards a pursuit of the self.

After this inaugural session, all the speakers were invited to a reception at the City hall to enjoy Belgian beers. Leuven is, after all, the headquarters of Interbrew and the place where Stella Artois beer was invented. What could be more delightful than to start this conference by a toast to this national drink?

On Tuesday July 27, the first plenary session began entitled "Lifting the Anchors: Genesis of the Quest?" Ana Maria Diaz-Stevens (Union Theological Seminary) began on the subject of "From Material Interests to Spiritual Quest: the Latino-Hispanic Paradox". Her paper shows the ways in which the Spanish speaking population of the United States, which will make up roughly 15 % of the population of the United States by the year 2020 (or 47 million) and 25 % (95 million) by the year 2050 represents a linguistic and cultural group in the midst of the identification process. She specifically focused on the role of religion in the process of identity development and went so far as to speak of a "Latino religious resurgence." Popular outpouring of religious feeling enable the Hispanics in the United States to think like Latinos but also as Christians. The social and educational services which have developed around churches give a feeling of belonging to a community of faith where the persistence of the Spanish language in the liturgy and masses only accentuates the construction of a distinct Latino identity, separate from the Euro-American environment. The second paper, presented by Nabutaka Inoue (Kokugakuin University) was entitled "From Religious Conformity to Innovation". It dealt with new religious movements in Japan and examined types of "voyages": the inner voyage in the world of the spirit, the extra-terrestrial space as a sacred space and the virtual space of the internet. Whereas the religious meaning of the planets, the solar system and cosmic forces have a preeminent place in certain new Japanese religions, it is above all the internet which has enabled them to spread over the last few years. The creation of "virtual temples," pilgrimages to "sacred" sites on the web, and the fulfillment via the computer of rites administered to the ancestors show how new technologies give rise to virtual religious experiences which could in the end

replace the traditional forms of religion. The chairperson for this session, Roberto Cipriani (University of Rome) stressed the descriptive quality of these two papers rather than a more scientific formulation of the issues, considering the first to have an overly ideological approach and the second to simply provide a typology of new religious movements in Japan. He pointed out that new approaches to the sacred should be studied within the framework of traditional monotheistic religions, which also use new technologies.

The morning ended with linguistic groups, i.e. sessions of informal encounters between participants from the same country or same language. The afternoon was devoted to parallel thematic workshops, which dealt with such varied topics as secularism, death and religion, religion and gender, religion and immigration, the sociology of religions in Vietnam, travel, religion and the surroundings, the paradigms of the study of religion, religion, state and politics, religion and school, cosmology and religion in South America.

In the evening, the Centre Catholique de Documentation et de Recherche (KADOC) hosted conference participants for the presentation of a book entitled "Sociologie et Religions, des relations ambiguës" edited by Liliane Voye and Jaak Billiet (published by the KADOC and the Presses Universitaires de Louvain). Many of the articles were written by members of the SISR and deal with the often strained relationships between different religions (monotheistic or other) and sociology. The issue of "what is religious" prompted reconsideration of theories and methods which although adequate for the description of religious experiences in the 19<sup>th</sup> century are no longer suitable for religious phenomena at the end of the twentieth century. The volume contains sections dealing with Catholicism (E. Gerard and K. Wils; J. Remy), Protestantism (R. Campiche), Judaism (R. Azria), Islam (C. Hames), Oriental religions (S. Shimazono), sects (B. Wilson) and new religious movements (E. Barker) and their relationship to the field of sociology. The evening also featured the opening of an exhibit entitled "The Catholics and Sociology, 50 years of SISR". It was fitting that the KADOC, an interdisciplinary center devoted to the study of Catholic life in Flanders/ Belgium where the archives of the International Society for the Sociology of Religion are located, would present this exhibit retracing the history of the SISR since its founding in Leuven in 1948.

An excursion to Ghent was organized Wednesday afternoon to the beginage of Ghent. These Flemish beginages are the former residences of "beguines", widows or single women who for a variable amount of time lived in religious communities while having their own houses. This lifestyle enabled these women to lead an independent life without entering religious orders that required vows of perpetuity and poverty. These self managed communities could thus ally spirituality and solidarity. In almost all

Flemish towns there was a beginage where within its walls, the houses of the beguines were located, thus forming small neighborhoods. These beguinages are interesting on both the architectural and urban levels but it is doubtless the significance of the religious experience arising from the mystical medieval trends which interested the group of researchers in the sociology of religions...

On July 29 the second plenary session took place devoted to "Constraints and Loopholes, the Regulations of the Religious Quest". The first speaker, Tariq Modood (University of Bristol) talked about "The place of Muslims in British Secular Multiculturalism". He retraced the emergence of English Muslim identity along with other manifestations of minority identity. He noted nevertheless that the identity politics favored by Blacks or other ethno-racial minorities do not operate in the same way for Muslims in the British system where religion and state must remain apart. The unacceptability of a Muslim identity in the eyes of multiculturalists stems, aside from the Islamic view of gender division and freedom of speech, from the fact that it is first of all a religious identity, which clashes with the hegemonic power of secularism in the British political culture. Thus although Great Britain is in favor of religious and ethnic pluralism, Muslim identity is perceived as the illegitimate child of British multiculturalism. Following this paper, Maria des Dorees Campos Machado (Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro) lectured on "Religions and Societies: A Latin American Puzzle". She described the trans-nationalism of religions in Latin America and their impact on the culture of this region. By identifying the socio-economic factors which contributed to religious pluralism she showed in particular how pentecostal movements are spreading among the poor, women and Blacks and provides them with survival strategies in situations of pauperization, exclusion and marginality. She also examined how these processes interact and indicated that although indigenous religious traditions and neoliberal practices in states with high social inequalities foster these cross border passages, the diversity of these religions in each context should not be ignored. The chairperson for the session, Albert Bastenier (Catholic University of Leuven) noted that both speakers argued on the basis of a socio-economic determinant in the religious quest, as a way of escaping social exclusion and/or to reaffirm one's identity in a migratory milieu. Their approaches however differed. The first text presented a sociological analysis showing a new modality of cultural and symbolic intervention in the public domain – by highlighting the paradox of public religious identity in Great Britain that encourages secular multiculturalism. The second text developed a socio-economic approach but appeared to overemphasize the economic to the detriment of

symbolic or spiritual factors which also play a role in phenomena of religious conversion in Latin America.

The morning ended with a second session of linguistic groups. The papers continued in the afternoon in parallel thematic sessions which dealt with such topics as the results of an ISSP survey; life histories as religious journeys, Islam in the West, pilgrimages, the Catholic church and the production of social cohesiveness, religion in post communist countries, the redefinition of religious boundaries in Latin America. One session was devoted to the screening of two films. The first "Seven Lightenings over California – Don Daniel a palero in Los Angeles" directed by Erwan Dianteill (CEPT/EHESS) and Gerard Pigeon (University of California) presents the practice of an Afro-Cuban religion (palo monte) transplanted to the West Coast of the USA, through the history of a leader of the temple. The second film entitled "On the Road to the Promised Land" was screened in the presence of the director, Daniel Friedmann (CNRS, CETSAP). This documentary, made in 1990 in Addis Ababa a short time before the airlift which brought the Jews of Ethiopia to Israel, deals with the problem of selection by the Israeli authorities of candidates for emigration as well as the precarious living conditions of these "urban refugees" waiting to depart...

The last day, Friday July 30, further pursued the theme of the promised land since the third plenary session was entitled "Lands Dreamt, Shattered Dreams". The first paper was presented by Gary Gerstle (University of Maryland): "American Freedom, American Coercion: Immigrant Journey to the Promised Land." The author focused on the myth of the United States as a promised land for the millions of immigrants who settled there. One interpretation of this myth views America as a land of discrimination and exclusion for those whose race, religion or political opinion elicits suspicion. The myth of a promised land on the model of the Old Testament also required the expulsion of the local populations and the discipline of recalcitrant members of the "chosen" community. These versions of the myth provide a broader framework for the study of immigrants to the United States. The second speaker, Andre Mary (CNRS) discussed "Visionary Journeys and Prophetic Wandering: from Nomadism to Foundation." Mary compared three types of relationships to journeys: the Bwiti initiation ritual among the Fang of Gabon, the nomadism of the Harriste prophets from the Ivory Coast and the pilgrimages of the faithful of an African prophetic church to the holy city of Imeko in Nigeria. The journeys of the initiated, the nomadism of the prophet and the pilgrimage of the faithful can be interpreted as a cycle where three forms of religious experience of a journey intertwine, connecting the promises of the journey outward and the success of the journey home.

As the chairperson of this session I suggested a third example to be added to these itineraries towards promised lands, that of the Jews of Ethiopia to Israel. The first text, which is historical, shows how the myth of the United States is built on the biblical model where the arrival of the 'chosen' people in this promised land is fulfilled to the detriment of the indigenous people and those excluded from the American Dream. In the second paper, which has an anthropological approach, the author examines three types of journey towards mythical places, where in certain cases failure gives a meaning to the journey. For instance, prophets who "return to their lands" and whose tombs become the places of pilgrimage perpetuate the myth. However both these papers raise the same question: what are the new forms this myth will take when the promised land is reached?

The morning continued with a forum of young researchers, an open presentation session, a workgroup on "ethics and religion", thematic sessions on "religion and democracy" and "political fiction and pentecostalism" and a session entitled "An Author faces his Critics" which presented the latest work by F. Champion and M. Cohen "Sects and Democracy."

The sessions continued in the afternoon on the following themes: the growth of Afro-American religions in the Americas and in the World, Sociology and Bible, Comparative Analysis of Religions, Public Management of Religious Pluralism, Religious Changes in the French-speaking World, Controversies on Brainwashing and the New Religious Movements. The second session of "An Author faces his Critics" presented the latest work by D. Hervieu-Leger, "Le Pelerin et le converti: La religion en mouvement."

Despite a heavy but well balanced program, this conference enriched the field of the sociology of religion by contributing new perspectives on contemporary religious manifestations and the methods and theories to study these forms of current religious expression. The presence of a large number of representatives from Latin America, the former Eastern block and Japan in particular helped extend the debate to areas of research which remain on the periphery of major works on the religions of Western Europe. However it is unfortunate that the monotheistic religions of Judaism and Islam as well as non-Western religions (African, Buddhist, etc.) were underrepresented in the papers presented. There were no papers dealing with Judaism except for one on Hungarian Jews and a single speaker from Iran spoke about the situation of state and religion in this country. Similarly few works dealt with indigenous African religions except in relationship to new forms of religious expression in Africa, starting with Pentecostalism. Most studies hence focused on Christianity primarily in

Europe and on current problems this religion faces in modern society. The research trends illustrated in this conference show that at the threshold of the twenty first century, the sociology of religion has yet to open itself to globalization and a world view even though the journey was its main theme.

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